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(CNSNews.com) - If Rep. William Jefferson (D-La.) is convicted in a federal bribery and corruption scandal, he will still enjoy a taxpayer-supported congressional pension of \$53,000 a year.

That's less than the up to \$64,000 received each year by former Rep. Randy Duke Cunningham (R-Calif.), who is now serving a federal prison term for bribery, conspiracy, mail and wire fraud and tax evasion.

And Dan Rostenkowski (D-Ill.), who pleaded guilty to mail fraud, is reaping the fattest retirement among convicted former congressmen -- \$126,000 a year.

In all, more than a dozen convicted felons who were formerly members of Congress qualify for more than \$900,000 in taxpayer-supported government pensions each year, according to estimates from the National Taxpayers Union, which calculated the benefits based on time of congressional service, eligibility and life expectancy (see list).

The NTU says congressional pensions are about three times more generous than the average salary offered in the private sector, and are protected by cost of living adjustments, a benefit only included in about one in 10 private pension funds.

Legislation is pending to halt pensions for crooked former members of Congress, but if enacted it would cover future crimes. It likely would not affect Jefferson, if he is convicted, because the Senate version of the proposal would not kick in until 2009.

Currently, only a conviction for espionage or treason requires a forfeiture of retirement benefits.

The leading proposals currently under consideration are narrow in scope, only revoking pension for lawmakers convicted of bribery, conspiracy to defraud the government, perjury and suborning perjury.

Even if that legislation were already in place, it might not affect future violations of public trust, said Melanie Sloan, executive director to the liberal watchdog group Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington.

"It should apply to any member who abuses their office, who does anything to sell their office or misuse the public trust," Sloan told Cybercast News Service.

She said limiting loss of pension to certain crimes would prompt members of Congress facing criminal charges to use the plea bargaining process to settle for charges that would allow them to keep their retirement packages.

Separate Senate and House bills unanimously passed their respective chambers earlier this year and are now in conference committee.

"It is disgusting that those who grossly exploited power for personal gain would continue to receive big checks thanks to American taxpayers," said Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) a co-sponsor of the Senate proposal.

But his proposal doesn't go far enough, in the view of Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Il.) who is offering in the House an alternative pension proposal that would include 21 separate crimes - five times as many as the number listed in the proposals that have passed the House and Senate.

Kirk's bill includes using intimidation to solicit a campaign contribution, tax evasion, misuse of public money, property or records, and fraud by wire, radio or TV.

"As stewards of the public money, we must do more to prevent those who violate the public's

trust from cashing their retirement checks from a jail cell," he said.

In the last 50 years, members of Congress have committed at least 16 different felonies, according to the Congressional Research Service. They include bribery, conspiracy, travel act violations, fraud, extortion, embezzlement and tax evasion.

In Kirk's state, a judge recently upheld the decision by the Illinois state retirement system to strip former Gov. George Ryan of the \$60,000 state pension he was entitled to before being convicted on corruption charges.

Other states, including California, Colorado, Florida, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Texas, Virginia and Wyoming, have statutes that deny state pension to public officials who are either convicted of felonies, abuse public office or are removed from office, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Missouri voters approved a state constitutional amendment last year to deny pensions to any official convicted of a felony or removed from office, while the Tennessee state legislature passed ethics reform legislation suspending the pensions of any officials convicted of a felony in relation to their official capacity.

The legislature in New Jersey, a state historically renowned for corruption, is considering a pension forfeiture proposal this year.

Sloan expects passage of the more limited national proposal this year because of public pressure stemming from last year's congressional scandals.

Others supporters of the legislation are less optimistic, however, recalling previous years when similar bills with unanimous passage have quietly died in closed conference committees.

The problem, said Ken Boehm, executive director of the conservative watchdog group National

Legal and Policy Center, is that although no member of Congress publicly opposes the measure, most privately oppose it.

"There is strong bi-partisan opinion on the hill that members of Congress are entitled to every perk they want and more," Boehm told Cybercast News Service. "They argue they could make more in the private sector. Some could, some couldn't. But they're paid an average of \$165,000 per year, have very generous insurance, and get a tax deduction for two homes."

Boehm said he's heard two arguments against revoking pensions.

"People would say, maybe if they served a long time and did one thing wrong, you shouldn't take away their ability to retire," Boehm said. "The other is: What about his family? What about his wife?"

"You could argue the same thing with any criminal," he argued. "If we let everybody with a family commit a felony, we'd have a lot more felons."